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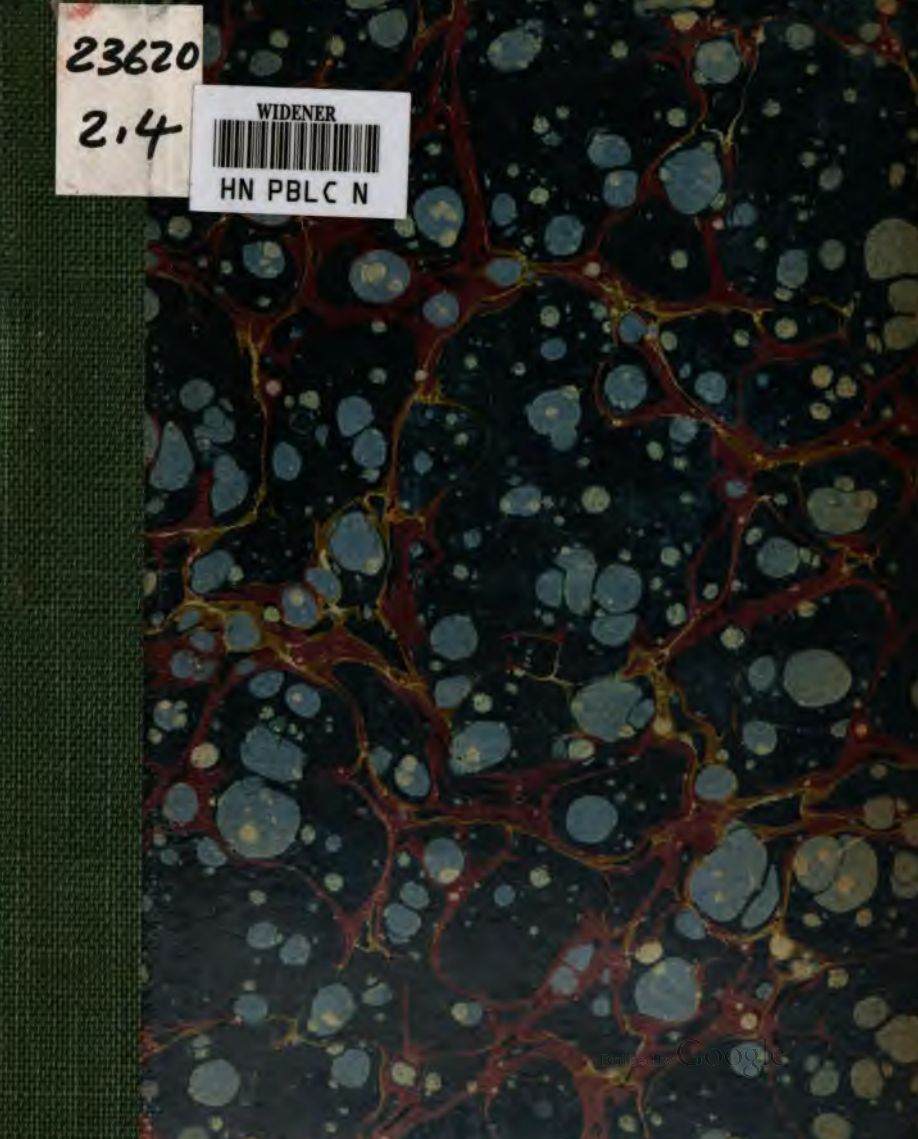
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THE NETS OF LOVE

THE NETS OF LOVE

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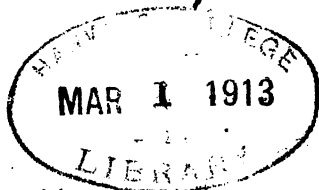
WILFRID WILSON GIBSON

LONDON

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Fine money.

TO
F. E. M.

NOTE.

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*I heard a harper sing
To the star-throned gods above :
“ O Starry Weavers of man’s fate,
Ye mock him ever, clown and king :
Though he escape the toils of hate,
He cannot flee the nets of love.”*

The Fugitive

As one who hears the baffled wolves' teeth click
Behind his heel, when, through the closing door,
He staggers spent, and, sinking to the floor,
Secure behind the bolted timbers lies,
Nigh-swooning in the rushes bedded thick,
With shuddering limbs and upward-staring eyes
That gaze and gaze in rapture but to see
The blessèd hearth-light shoot in yellow gleams
Among the shadowy rafters; so to thee,
O love, I come. Across ice-mailed streams,
Knee-deep through frosted bracken, over scars
That cleave, dark-edged, a tingling sky of stars,

THE FUGITIVE

Through low-boughed forests, cavernous with
night,

By lairs of crouching deaths, to thee I win
At last, O love ; though, sharp upon my flight,
I know thy father's lean, blood-thirsty pack
Of thralls must follow, till, again, within
The shelter of thy prison-tower they take
The broken lover whom, upon the rack,
Night after night, they tortured for thy sake.

Yea, for thy sake: so said they, with a smile ;
But I, in anguish lying, looked the while,
Beyond the cell's dark vaulting, on thy face
Which burned compassionate o'er me till the
place
Seemed full of light and rustling of green leaves
And murmuring of some bough-shadowed stream.

THE FUGITIVE

Yea, I looked ever on thee, even as now
I look, O love, if this be no wild dream.

Oh, let my fingers touch thy moon-pale brow,
Thy clustered hair—the crisp, dim gold of
sheaves—

Thy warm, red, breathing lips, thy quivering
cheek!

I dream no more; no pain-wrought vision thou,
No phantom that will vanish when the cord
Twines sharper in the flesh. I thank the Lord
The pulses of my fingers throb to thine.

Love, lean thou closer; press thy lips to mine—
My lips that burn with year-long thirst un-
slaked—

Then, pausing, speak; I yearn to hear thee speak

THE FUGITIVE

My name as thou didst breathe it ere I fell,
Love-blinded, in the pit thy father staked
To trap my life, because I loved too well.
Canst thou so speak it now? Dost thou not
shrink
From this fire-warped, rack-twisted thing that
came
To thee from out the shuddering night, to sink,
Huddled and spent, before thee? Nay, thine
eyes
Are quick with love—no cold compassion lies
In their blue deeps, with fire of love burnt
clear;
Pity and grief have perished in the flame
Of love triumphant that, by time unquenched,
Hath burst to life; beyond the clutch of fear
I lie, in love's flame-shower of rapture drenched.

THE FUGITIVE

Why dost thou start? What thunders shake
the door?

Fear not, O love; they come, but nevermore
Shall they lay hold on this frail life, whose fire,
Blazing exultant with fulfilled desire,
Hath leapt to loose heaven's glory through the
night,
And mingles with the everlasting light.

In the Byre

THE warm milk swishes in the pail ;
The kine's warm breathing fills the byre ;
My brow, against the hot flanks pressed,
Throbs, aching, as, with hands that tire,
I ease the straining teats, nor rest
Until the teeming udders fail.

But, louder than the hissing spurt,
My wild heart flutters at my side ;
And in my ears the pulses drum,
As through my veins, a burning tide,
The quick blood gushes ; blind and dumb,
I shudder like a leveret hurt.

IN THE BYRE

One moment in the pool of light
That quivers by the open door
A shadow fell as they went by :
I raised my eyes ; then looked no more.
They gazed upon the western sky
With parted lips and foreheads bright.

They passed ; and though I, toiling, bide,
My bitter thoughts are at their heel,
And follow where their footsteps go :
I see the peewit rise and wheel
Round them with creaking wings and slow ;
I tread the sheep-track at their side ;

With them I cross the frothing burn,
And scale the tumbled grey stone-dyke ;
And pant behind them through the brake

IN THE BYRE

That climbs the crag; the last rays strike
The rippling waters of the lake,
Far, far below, as, in the fern,

They sink to watch the bobbing coots
That dive among the reedy sedge;
A sheep from some far shieling cries;
Gold-quivering, on the fell's dark edge
The day's last glimmer pales and dies;
Night gathers; and a lone owl hoots.

Then, as he turns to her, the light
Leaps in her eyes, and blind I flee
Across the fells—as I have fled
Through nights of quaking agony,
Till day's cold dawning, pale and dread,
Hath put the sheltering dark to flight.

IN THE BYRE

O big, brown kine within the byre,
Life stirs no tumult in the pools
Of your brown eyes that gaze on me ;
But I, within the net of fools
Entangled, must for ever be
The prey of passion's prisoned fire.

The Fool

NIGHT-LONG the rushes whisper as I turn
With restless rustling to the flickering dark
That shudders as the spent logs smouldering burn,
On the cold hearthstone, to a dwindling spark.
Though I, at last, escape day's mockery
Of bitter-jangling bells about my ears,
No meed of easeful slumber comes to me.
The rushes whisper ever of my fears ;
And now, when from my lips the nimble jest
No longer tumbles, broken meats to earn,
My heart, by day crushed silent in my breast,
Cries out within me, and I turn and turn,
Finding nor sleep nor comfort anywhere.

THE FOOL

If I but close my eyes, I see her stand
Before me in the night—her thick, brown hair
Thrust back from her bright forehead by the hand
That shades the burning hazel of her eyes ;
Or else I see her, seated by her lord
On the high daïs as the dim light dies ;
Or with her chattering maidens at the board,
Beneath the flame of torches ; or, at morn,
Through the sun-dappled gloom of alleys green,
Whose arches echo to the rousing horn,
I see her ride like some great ballad-queen.

I see her as I saw her all day long—
With clear, untroubled eyes and lifted head,
Dreaming of love, or singing some old song
Of lovers happy with the happy dead,
With pitiful, sweet mouth ; for love to her

THE FOOL

Is a fresh-welling stream of happiness
Which no cold winds to troubled eddies stir,
Nor pebbles ruffle to shrill-tongued distress.

But, love's a spate rock-bound that foams and
frets;

A tossing beacon in tempestuous night;
A mighty salmon tangled in the nets;
A mallard arrow-stricken in full flight;
A hounded stag at bay within his lair;
A heron 'neath the taloned falcon's swoop;
A crag-born kestrel taken in a snare;
An eagle caged within a gilded coop;
A battle-snuffing stallion on the curb;
A quivering target by a quarrel cleft;
A rankling wound that knows no healing herb;
A sea-swept galley of her rudder reft;

THE FOOL

A tethered bullock chafing in the byre;
A wolf sore-wounded in the trapper's pit;
A cloud of thunder with a heart of fire;
A sapling by the summer-lightning split;
A sword within a silken scabbard pent;
A ruddy fruit whose core is bitterness;
A giant captive in a victor's tent;
A breaking heart beneath a motley dress.

The Lambing

SOFTLY she slept in the night—her new-born
babe at her breast,

A little, warm, dimpling hand to the yielding
bosom pressed—

As I rose from her side to go—though sore was
my heart to stay—

To the ease of the labouring ewes that else would
have died ere day.

Banking the peats on the hearth, I reached from
the rafter-hook

My lanthorn, and kindled the wick; and, taking
my plaid and crook,

THE LAMBING

I lifted the latch, and turned, once more, to see
if she slept,
And looked on the slumber of peace, ere into the
night I stept—

Into the swirling dark of the driving, blinding
sleet,
And a world that seemed to sway and slip from
under my feet,
As if rocked in the wind that swept the starless,
roaring night,
Yet fumed in a fury vain at my lanthorn's
shielded light.

Clean-drenched in the first, wild gust, I battled
across the garth,
And passed through the clashing gate—the warm
peat-glow of the hearth

THE LAMBING

And the peace of love in my breast—the craven
voices to quell,

As I set my teeth to the wind, and turned to
the open fell.

Over the tussocks of bent I strove till I reached
the fold—

My brow like ice, and my hands so numbed that
they scarce could hold

My staff, or unloosen the pen; but I heard a
lamb's weak cries

As the gleam of my lanthorn lit the night of its
new-born eyes.

Toiling and trembling, I watched each young
life struggle for breath,

Fighting till dawn for my flock with the oldest
of herdsmen, death;

THE LAMBING

And glad was my heart when, at last, the stack-
yard again I crossed,
And thought of the strife well-o'er with never a
yeanling lost.

But, ere I came to the door of my home, drawing
wearily nigh,
I heard with a boding heart a feeble, querulous
cry,
Like a motherless yeanling's bleat; and I stood
in the dawn's grey light,
Afraid of I knew not what, sore-spent with the
toil of the night.

Then, setting a quaking hand to the latch, I
opened the door,
And, shaking the cold from my heart, I stumbled
across the floor

THE LAMBING

Unto the bed where she lay, calm-bosomed, in
dreamless rest,
And the wailing baby clutched in vain at the
lifeless breast.

I looked on the cold, white face ; then sank with
a cry by the bed,
And knew that the hand of death had stricken
my whole joy dead—
My flock, my world, and my heart—with my
love at a single blow ;
And I cried : “ I, too, will die ! ” and it seemed
that life ebbed low,

And death drew nigh unto me ; when I felt the
touch on my cheek
Of a little, warm hand out-thrust, and I heard
that wailing weak ;

THE LAMBING

And, knowing that not for me yet was there rest
from love or strife,
I caught the babe to my breast, and looked in
the eyes of life.

The Victor

You came not as I dreamed that you would come,
Hewing a pathway through embattled spears,
The morning on your brow ; yet all my fears
Fell stricken, and my sorrows faltered dumb.
Slowly you rode across the wintry heath
From some far field of battle, with bent head ;
Bearing a shield whose blazon war had shed ;
And at your stirrup swung a swordless sheath.
Yourspent horse, stumbling 'mid the quaking peat,
Among the treacherous moss-hags, floundering,
fell ;
As one who moves in some fear-ridden spell,
Whose eyes are dulled and blinded by defeat,

THE VICTOR

You led the lame beast gently up the slope
Until you came within the castle-garth ;
I drew you, shivering, to the blazing hearth,
And watched the red, uncertain tide of hope
Surge in your cheeks, and saw the old light leap
In your dimmed eyes, till, by the warm peat-glow,
You sank in slumber, breathing calm and slow ;
And still I watch you, dreaming, as you sleep.

The wasting years, the barren days are past ;
No longer memory lets his arrows fly,
To stab and stab the heart that would not die
Because it knew that you would come at last.
Your eyelids flicker, and more fitfully
You slumber as the peat-ash crumbles white :
Yet, though you waken in the heart of night,
Within your eyes will dawn love's victory.

The Lough

BESIDE my ever-grazing sheep,
I watched the white cloud-shadows race
Across the blue lough's ruffled deep;
When, leaning o'er the pillared steep,
Beneath whose shade dark waters sleep,
I saw her white face by my face.

Where, mirrored in the shadow clear,
My own strange eyes looked up at me,
Her brown eyes glistened bright with fear
As those of some young fallow-deer
That, startled by a glancing spear,
Stays, cowering, ere it turn to flee.

THE LOUGH

Then foam-white face and wavering hair
Within the water shuddered dark ;
And, thinking some hill-maiden fair
Had leant o'er me, I turned, but there
No maid I found ; though from the air,
Hawk-shadowed, dropped a silent lark,

As, under sudden-swooping dread,
From my so long unclouded life
Joy fluttered, falling still and dead ;
And sheltering peace on light wings fled ;
And rent with pain, my torn heart bled,
Caught in the clutch of taloned strife.

And I—who thought to see love's light
Well in the clear, untroubled blue
Of maiden-eyes with morning bright,

THE LOUGH

And watch with love the calm years' flight—
Must seek in everlasting night
Those eyes that pierced me through and through.

Beyond the fells' far edge, the day
Fades slowly from my eager eyes;
And in the lough's cold waters grey
With rustling stir the dark reeds sway,
As up the ancient, star-strewn way
I watch the last moon slowly rise.

I wait until the cold moon-beam
Shall pierce with light the darkling lake—
That I may plunge within the gleam,
And follow through the deeps of dream
Her glancing eyes and hair astream
Through night no dawn shall ever break.

The Fire

BRUSHWOOD and broom I bring to feed my fire :
Brief-flaming bracken ; brittle-flaring ling ;
Quick-crackling gorse ; and cones that smoulder-
ing sing

With sappy hiss as blue flames jet and spire ;

Beech-mast and leaves, through long years
bedded deep ;

Pine-needles stacked about rock-rooted firs
In woodland hollows where no echo stirs —
I bring to feed the blaze that shall not sleep.

And fierce it leaps, exultant, through the night,
In fresh-fed fury roaring to the stars ;

THE FIRE

While gaunt, black shadows move among the
scars,

Whose craggy spurs are tipped with golden light.

By night and day, the perishing, bright flame,
Wind-flourished, flares and fails, yet never dies ;
But lives that I therein may watch your eyes—
Those fire-bright eyes my love could never tame,

Which, from the white heat of the burning core,
Look out upon me, as I gaze and gaze.
I bring fresh boughs to feed the hungry blaze,
That fire may burn your heart for evermore,

Wherever in far southern lands you roam,
By what marshlight of wandering passion led ;
For cold and white and empty lies my bed ;
Deserted, bare, and windswept is my home.

THE FIRE

Without foreboding, from the fold I turned
To come to you, but o'er the heather-thatch
No smoke of welcome curled : I raised the latch ;
No fire of welcome on the hearth-stone burned.

I called your name ; I climbed the ladder-stair
Unto the roof-tree-chamber, raftered low ;
The sunset filled it with a golden glow
Of mocking light, but you I found not there.

Long, long I called your name in bield and byre,
And fold and shieling, over hill and dale ;
Your heart heard not. With hands that never
fail,
I feed and feed the ever-failing fire.

Wide-eyed, nor ever slumbering, night or day,
I watch the flame that lives upon my life,

THE FIRE

That trampling shower or thunder's crashing
strife

Shall never quench till all be burned away;

Till, when, at last, consumed and spent, I fall
In cold, grey ash of passion's fiery gold,
Where'er you be, your heart will shudder cold,
Your feet will turn to answer to my call.

The Haymakers

LAST night, as in my bed, awake,
I fretted for the day,
I heard the landrail's ceaseless creak
Among the unmown hay ;

And in my head the thought that burned,
And parched my lips and throat,
Was like a wheel of fire that turned
Upon that aching note.

From time's unceasing loom outdrawn
On webs of glimmering light
The slow hours trailed, as though no dawn
Would end the breathless night.

But with the crowing of the cock,
The hours of waiting passed ;

THE HAYMAKERS

And slowly a shrill-chiming clock
Struck out the night at last.

I rose; and soon my hot eyes roved
O'er meadows dewy-deep
That 'neath the wind of morning moved
As if they turned from sleep;

And where the crimson-rambler wreathed
The casement of my room,
Upon my brow the cool air breathed
As on each fading bloom.

I watched the martin wheel and poise
Above his nested mate,
When, clear through morning's murmurous noise
I heard a clicking gate,

THE HAYMAKERS

As, down the dipping meadow-road,
He bore, with easy pace,
His shouldered scythe ; and brightly glowed
The dawnlight on his face.

All morn, with swinging chorus blithe,
Unwearied, through cool hours,
Was heard the swishing of the scythe
Among the grass and flowers.

All morn, behind the swaying row
Of shoulders brown and bare,
I followed, glad at heart to know
He moved before me there.

And, as I laboured with the rake
Among the stricken grass,

THE HAYMAKERS

Light-footed in the mowers' wake,
The happy hours did pass.

Too swift they fled ; and all too soon
The hour of resting came,
When o'er the withering field the noon
Hung like an azure flame ;

For, as he sank, in shadow cool,
From out the sun that burned,
Beside an alder-shaded pool,
Not unto me he turned,

But looked upon the quivering blaze
With blue eyes cold and clear,
That never thrilled with love's amaze
Of joy and hope and fear.

THE HAYMAKERS

And though, afar, beneath the briar,
I watched him where he lay,
He knew not that my eyes afire
Burned brighter than the day.

With easy glance of careless life
Upon the untroubled blue
He looked, undreaming of the strife
That shook me through and through.

And yet so loudly in my breast
Beat my tormented heart—
As if to rouse him from his rest—
I thought to see him start,

Like one awaked from midnight sleep
By knocking in the dark ;

THE HAYMAKERS

But in his eyes, unclouded deep
There gleamed no kindling spark.

To-night, no rails, unresting, crake
'Mid fallen grass and flowers;
Naught stirs, and yet I lie awake
And count the crawling hours;

And, as I watch the glimmering light,
I wait dawn tremblingly,
Lest in the silence of the night,
His heart has turned to me;

Lest I shall find the day has come—
As yet the day shall rise—
When he will stand before me dumb,
The fire within his eyes.

The Arrow

By peat-black waters flecked with foam,
She lay beneath the flaming west;
I plucked the arrow from her breast,
And staunched the wound, and bore her home.

Before the hearth's warm-glowing peat,
I laid her on my bracken-bed,
And loosed the dank hair round her head,
And chafed her snow-cold hands and feet,

Until the living colour crept
Through her sweet body; and her eyes
Looked into mine with still surprise,
Once only, ere she softly slept.

THE ARROW

Yet, though she wakened not nor stirred,
I looked in those dark eyes all night
Within the peat-glow, till the light
Of morning roused some restless bird ;

When, in the dawning's drowsy grey,
With watching spent, I fell asleep,
And slumbered till the bleat of sheep
Awakened me ; and it was day.

Cold on my brow I felt the wind
That gently flapped the unlatched door,
And stirred the bracken on the floor ;
Whereon I looked, and thought to find

Beauty yet slumbering in the gold
Of withered fern ; but no dark head

THE ARROW

Now nestled in the bracken-bed
That rustled in the dawnwind cold.

And she was gone, I knew not where;
I only knew that I must go
To seek her ever, high and low,
O'er hills and valleys of despair.

So, flinging wide the flapping door,
I turned my back upon my home.
By peat-black waters flecked with foam,
From dawn till dark, for evermore,

O'er moss and fell, I keep my quest,
Grown old and frail, with failing breath;
Though now I know that only death
May pluck the arrow from my breast.

Roman's Leap

THEY found you nigh the foot of Roman's Leap,
Deep-buried in the bracken's rustling gold,
Your arm beneath you bent, your brown face
 cold;
Yet, all-unheeding, round you grazed your sheep.

They found you nigh the foot of Roman's Leap :
They laid you on a hurdle, bracken-strewn ;
They bore you home beneath the waning moon,
With laboured breathing up the craggy steep.

They found you nigh the foot of Roman's Leap :
Their whispering shadows darkened in the door ;

ROMAN'S LEAP

With clacking clogs they crossed the sanded
floor ;
And in with them the whole night seemed to
sweep.

They found you nigh the foot of Roman's Leap :
They laid you out upon the four-post bed,
With candles at your feet and at your head—
Salt on your breast, your soul from harm to keep.

They found you nigh the foot of Roman's Leap :
I watch alone beside you in the night ;
So calm your face seems in the candle-light,
I watch and wonder if you only sleep.

They found you nigh the foot of Roman's Leap :
Day glimmers wanly at the blinded pane ;

ROMAN'S LEAP

Yet never will you wake at dawn again,
And from my side in tender silence creep.

They found you nigh the foot of Roman's Leap;
Deep-buried in the bracken's rustling gold.
Dumb grief within my heart is pent and cold;
Unloose thy clutch, O death, that I may weep!

In the Night

I NEVER thought to see the light
Of day, or watch the pale sun rise,
Who, in the wondering heart of night,
With fearful, living eyes
Have looked upon a soul new-come from paradise.

I roamed through glimmering syke and slack,
Grief-ridden, o'er the fells afar—
Above me looming, gaunt and black,
Sheer crag and soaring scar
That pillared low-hung night unlit of moon or
star.

IN THE NIGHT

No bark of foxes rent the air,
Nor any moor-owl's hunting-cry ;
Mist-laden silence everywhere
Drooped from the windless sky
On shadowy plumes that low upon the bent did
lie.

Unrippling, 'neath the mist, the lake
Like some wan, ghostly water gleamed ;
Yet slumbered not, but awed, awake,
Beneath the dark crag seemed
To wait some vision dread whereof by day it
dreaded.

Yea, hushed the whole earth listening lay
When loud I called upon the name
That burdens my dumb heart by day ;

IN THE NIGHT

And wonder overcame
My sorrow as the mist was cleft by sudden
flame ;

And in the tranced heart of night,
She stood before my living eyes,
Her body glistening and white,
As though she fresh did rise
From crystal, dreaming deeps of pools of paradise.

Upon a little hill apart—
The eternal radiance round her shed—
Her beauty burned so on my heart
That, filled with happy dread,
I sank as one whom God with joy hath stricken
dead.

IN THE NIGHT

Yet, ere the darkness closed, I felt
The breath of heaven upon my cheek,
And knew that in the grass she knelt
Over my body weak,
Then stood with parted lips as if she fain would
speak ;

Though no words came ; and, silently,
The swathing mist about her swept ;
And on me from the midnight sky
A blinding darkness leapt,
And long, as one new-dead, within its clutch I
slept ;

Until the curlew's calling shrill
Sang rippling through that slumber deep ;
And, waking, down a far-off hill,

IN THE NIGHT

I watched the shadows creep
Before the light of dawn that crested every steep.

Wan, wan doth gleam the dawning light,
And wanly doth the pale sun rise ;
My soul is weary for the night
When I, with deathless eyes,
From earth's last ridge shall look on her in
paradise.

The Harp

I HEARD a murmurous sound of throbbing strings
That quivered in the sunlight by the stream—
Sad notes that fluttered like a young heart breaking
The dim, blue hollows of the woodland waking
With sorrows from the shadow-world of dream,
And tales of shadow-haunted queens and kings.

Over your harp you bent ; but when I came
Your eyes met mine, and your sad singing died—
Though yet among the strings your fingers
 straying
Thrilled the hushed woodlands with enchanted
 playing—

THE HARP

As you arose to wander by my side,
Breathing sweet words that set my heart aflame.

From cups of crystal and of amethyst
And golden bowls of summer, sapphire-lipped,
We drank deep draughts of life, O love, together ;
We wandered through dim nights among the
heather

In late September when the young moon dipped
Her amber horn in dewy, silver mist.

And now that winter comes, and wood and
fell

In one white whirl are hidden from our eyes,
Dreaming together by the sparkling embers,
You touch, once more, the harp that still re-
members—

THE HARP

Though in our hearts no shade of sorrow lies—
The dark-eyed sorrows that in dreamland dwell.

I hear once more the tale of queens and kings
Caught in the nets of love, and how they died;
Yet—though for all the sorrow of the telling
Tears of compassion in my eyes are welling—
Because we two have wandered side by side,
My heart may grieve not with the grieving strings.

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